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ABSTRACT

Stereotypes of the African American male in the popular media have imprinted a harsh and unflattering image in the public consciousness that has negatively affected the self-image of African Americans. Additionally, those stereotypes affect the decision making of employers, police officers, teachers, and other authority figures, resulting in a self-fulfilling prophecy. The following negative effects of the devaluation process are outlined: (1) African American males have a shorter life span than any other population group in America, due to a disporportionate vulnerability to disease and homicide; (2) structural changes in the labor market and racially discriminatory hiring practices create high unemployment among African American men, wide gaps between the earnings of African American and White men, and a disproportionate number of African American men living in poverty; (3) dysfunctional sociopsychological conditions include a large number of female-headed families, a lack of positive male role models, intraracial crime, and low levels of educational attainment; (4) the internalized negative self-image and the negative attitudes of authority figures result in the disproportionate involvement of African American males with the criminal justice system; and (5) the location of drug markets within African American communities results in an increase in violence and drug abuse. Changing economic and demographic conditions may provide a "window of opportunity" for improvement, but African American males must improve their education and skills in order to participate in the future economy. A list of 13 references is appended. (FMW)

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RUNTA (TRUTH)

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Volume 3 Number 2 June 1990

STONY THE ROAD THEY TROD: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE

- **African American males have a shorter life span than any other population group in America.**
- **Not only do African American males tread a stony path in terms of physical life, they also encounter a number of barriers to the achievement of a healthy economic life.**
- **Although the psychological costs of the devaluation and systemic oppression of African American males have not been fully estimated, they are tremendous.**

From the Editor

Both beyond and within the African American community, images of the African American male have transcended the factual and approached the mythological. More than 25 years ago, Martha Reaves and the Vandellas implanted folkloric attitudes when they sang, "He's shiftless and he's lazy, he's 'bout to drive me crazy, honey chile." In 1990, movies and other forms of popular media continue to imprint on the public consciousness harsh and unflattering images of African American males through representations that are little more than caricature.

Such treatments are not benign. Generations of African American males have been socialized into self-images that seek consistency with the paradigmatic portraits of themselves depicted in popular accounts. Additionally, employers, policemen, teachers and other authority figures come to de-individualize African American males and, consequently, allow into their decision-making process fiction as well as fact. What was fiction is sometimes transformed into fact, and the road that African American men must tread becomes even stonier.

Accordingly, this issue of **Runta** examines the contemporary status of African American males. Entitled "Stony the Road They Trod," it presents data showing how African American males continue to tread a stony road as they seek to navigate their lives through the "troubled waters" of American society.

Read and reflect...

Betty Collier Watson

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There are many signs that African American males are a dangerously devalued group. A compelling example of the devaluation was seen in the last presidential election when an African American male, Willie Horton, was used as a symbol of evil and degradation for blatant political purposes. More recently, the devaluation of African American males was revealed, through the credibility Boston police assigned to Charles Stuart's account of the murder of his pregnant wife. Based solely on Mr. Stuart's statement, scores of African American males were indiscriminately detained and questioned by police as suspects in this incident. Similarly, the racially motivated killing of 16 year-old Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, New York also attests to the devaluation of African American males. The outcome of the devaluation process is that African American males have become an increasingly endangered group. The cumlative empirical evidence in a variety of critical areas is persuasive on this point.

☐ **African American males have a shorter life span than any other population group in America.**

•In 1987, the life expectancy of African American males was 65.4 years. In contrast, the life expectancy of white males was 72.1 years. Between 1985 and 1987, the life expectancy of African American males declined significantly.

•Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and pneumonia/influenza are the only two major categories where death rates for African American males improved since 1970 in comparison to white males.

•African American males die from most major diseases at rates that far exceed their white counterparts. In 1986, for example, 89.4% more African American males than white males died of cerebrovascular disease, 119.6% more died of prostate cancer, 55.4% more died of pneumonia and influenza, 96% more died of diabetes mellitus, and 70.5% more died of chronic liver disease and cirrhosis.

•Homicide is the leading cause of death for African American males age 15-24 years. In 1987, the homicide rate for African American males in this age group was 85.6 per 100,000, seven times higher than the rate for their white counterparts and 43% above the 1990 target rate of 60 per 100,000. On the other hand, African American males in this age group are less likely than whites to commit suicide.

•An African American male has a 1-in-21 chance of being murdered before his 25th birthday. Between 1984 and 1987, the homicide death rate for African American males age 15-24 rose by 39%, returning to about the same level as existed in 1980.

•In part because of their exceptionally high death rate from homicide and other causes, there are only 85 African American males for every 100 females in the 25-44 age group.

Such data are frightening. Societies exist in order to increase the chances of survival and physical well-being of their members. Thus data such as those presented above indicate a failure of the broader American society to socialize, acculturate and integrate African American males and protect their welfare. It is insufficient to view the array of factors which reduce the life chances of African American males as soley the products of individual choice. Behavior choices themselves are contoured by the society in which we live.

☐ **Not only do African American males tread a stony path in terms of physical life, they also encounter a number of barriers to the achievement of a healthy economic life.**

•African Americans made considerable economic strides between 1940 and 1970, but these gains were surpassed in the 1980's by even stronger gains by whites. Thus, the earnings of African American men relative to white men worsened during the decade of the eighties.

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Runta provides tiumely data and analysis on African Americans. It is issued as a public service. Direct inquiries to: Dr. Betty C. Watson, Editor.

•Between 1973 and 1986, the proportion of employed African American males age 18-29 years working in manufacturing industries declined by 43%, compared to a 28% for all groups.

•The unemployment rate of African American male teenagers persisted at exceedingly high levels throughout the 1980s, standing at about 37% at the end of the decade. The comparable rate for white male teens was less than 16%.

•The overall unemployment rate for African American males is 12.1%, more than double the white rate of 5.3%.

•Young African American men are also more likely than young whites to be out of the labor force. About 40% of African American teen males are out of the labor force, compared to 29% of white teens; 17.5% of African American males age 20-24 years are out of the labor force, as against 7.8% of their white counterparts.

•Between 1973 and 1986, the number of African American non-Hispanic males age 18-29 years who were employed year-round fell by 20%. By contrast, the number of white and Hispanic males in this age group employed year-round increased.

•In March 1990, the average weekly earnings of African American males with non-working wives was $340, compared to $457 for their white counterparts.

•In 1988, approximately one third of all African American males age 15-24 lived in poverty, compared to one in one hundred white males in this age group.

In Spite of the advent of the women's movement in the sixties, American society has retained norms which measure the value of a male by the degree to which he is a "breadwinner." The data above suggest that the American economic system is failing to absorb African American males into the contemporary labor market. This observation is linked to the fact that both structural changes in the labor market and the continued operation of racially discriminatory hiring practices constrain the economic progress of African American men.

☐ **The ominous plight of African American males has contributed to a large number of female-headed families, a lack of positive adult male role models, intra-racial crime, and other dysfunctional socio-psychological conditions.**

•African American female-headed families were 50% of all African American families with children in 1985, but received only 25% of the total African American income, while 70% of the total income was received by husband-wife families.

•In the course of their childhood, 86% of African American children are likely to spend some time in a single-parent household, more than twice the rate for white children. Contrary to popular belief, a slightly greater percentage of African American than white households consist of a male and his own children.

•Approximately 20% of African American males are not high school graduates, relative to 15.8% of white males, 16.5% of African American females, and 12.8% of white females. Among African Americans, the proportions of males and females who complete high school but go no farther are comparable at around 37%.

•Only 42.8% of African American male high school graduates enrolled in or completed 1 or more years of college in 1988, relative to 49.6% of African American females, 59.2% of white females, and 57.9% of white male high school graduates. Among African Americans, the proportions of males and females completing 4 or more years of college are comparable at just over 11%.

•From 1987 to 1988 alone, the proportion of African American male high school graduates enrolled in or completing one or more years of college dropped by 5.5 percentage points. College enrollment rates for all other demographic groups increased during this period.

Joblessness, the loss of educational ground, the increasing numbers of female-headed households, etc. are intricately related conditions. Indeed, such variables interact to create a self-perpetuating cyle. The loss of educational ground, for example, increases the probability of joblessness. Less obviously, the relatively lower levels of educational attainment of African American males hinders the courtship process and, subsequently, family formation. Thus, such forces combine to generate psychosocial dysfunction.

☐ **Although the psychological costs of the devaluation and systemic oppression of African American males have not been fully estimated, they are tremendous.**

•While representing only 5.9% of the U.S. populatiion, African American males constitute nearly 50% of all prison imates. The lifetime chance of incarceration is six times higher for African American males than it is for white males.

•In 1984, despite representing only 15% of the U.S. population 18 years of age or younger, African American males in this age group accounted for 45% of all juvenile arrests for murder/non-negligent homicide; 54% for manslaughter; 68% for forcible rape; and 39% for robbery and aggravated assault.

•Almost one-in-four African American men in the age group 20-29 is either in prison, in jail, on probation, or on parole on any given day. For white men in this age group, only one-in-sixteen is under the control of the criminal justice system.

•It has been determined that the number of young African American men under the control of the criminal justice system (606,690) is greater than the total number of African American men of all ages enrolled in college (436,000). For white males, the comparable figures are 4,600,000 in higher education and 1,054,508 in the criminal justice system.

•African American juvenile males are more than four times as likely to be arrested and incarcerated for a violent offense than are white juvenile males.

As one reviews the data on African American males and the criminal justice system, one sees the interaction of two problems. On the one hand, the devaluation of African American males becomes internalized and leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. On the other hand, the data also reflect pronounced differences in the degree to which African American versus white males are detained, arrested, and convicted of criminal offenses.

☐ **In recent years, the survival of African American males has been threatened by the centering of drug markets in African American communities.**

•Much of the violence that has turned many of our cities into "war zones" can be attributed to the sale of crack cocaine. However, many African American males who are "employed" in this "market" do not use drugs. Overall, 80% of all cocaine users in the U.S. are white, while only 14% are African Americans.

•Nevertheless, African American males are disproportionately victims of the drug trade. in 1984, African American males accounted for 12 percent of all 13-24 year old males reporting to hospital emergency rooms for drug abuse. They represented 15 percent of AIDS cases in this age group.

Substance abuse continues to constitute a major threat to African American males as well as to the broader African American community. The location of drug markets within African American communities does create "employment" opportunities, but such opportunities often lead to death and distruction. Additionally, such "markets" deal in "goods" that are hazardous to the health of their consumers. Thus, the drug trade constitutes a dual threat to the lives of African Americans, particularly African American males.

Despite the ominous statistics, the African American male has been a significant contributor to America's past and will play a major role in the next century. A productive African American male is an investment in the future of the nation, both domestically and internationally. The Hudson Institute, National Alliance of Business, and many other groups point to "workforce 2000" and the need for every able-bodied American to be productive if the U.S. is to remain competitive in the changing world marketplace. Traditional minority groups and those least prepared for work will make up the majority of the country's labor pool. This situation could present a crucial "window of opportunity" to African American males.

However, in order to take advantage of the changing economic and demographic conditions, African American males must be effectively prepared to meet the challenges ahead. Thus African American males will need greatly improved education and skills training to compete and contribute in the economy of tomorrow. Above all, the African American male must be in the forefront of his own survival. His spirit must be renewed with hope and vision.

The African American community as a whole must become more empowered in the preservation and advancement of the African American male. This role entails becoming more proactive in creating and expanding positive opportunities for African American males, with a particular emphasis on the needs of the younger generation. Programs such as male monitoring, rites of passage, transitional services for ex-offenders, and male fellowship

clubs could provide vital ancillary benefits in this regard. Otherwise, volunteer service organizations, religious institutions, fraternities and sororities, business and industry groups, educational institutions, and the media, as well as the policymaking community at all levels, must collaborate and do their fair share to tap the potential that the African American male represents.

Indeed, we all have a responsibility for implementing meaningful preservation and enhancement measures that promise to restore the African American male to his full dignity. All such efforts should be instituted with love and compassion for one of the world's true human treasures, the African American male.

SOURCES: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Health in the United States, 1989*, March 1990; Jacquelyne J. Jackson, "But Where Are the Men?," *The Black Scholar*, December, 1971, pp. 30-41; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment and Earnings, March 1988;* Andrem Sum and Neal Fogg, "The Changing Economic Fortunes of Young Black Men in the American Economy of the 1980's" Center for labor Market Studies, Northwestern University, July 1989; *Quarterly Economic Report on the African American Worker*, National Urban League Research Department, May 1990; U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, *Fact Sheet*, July 1989; U.S. Department of Education, Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Educational Statistics, 1985-1986;* U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Correctional Population in the United States–1986;* "The College Gap," American Council on Education, Office of Minority Concerns, February 1989; Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports, 1984;* U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, "Money Income and Poverty Status in the united States–1989"; Larry Bumphas, "Children and Marital Disruption: A Replication and Update," *Demography*, 1984, pp. 49-65; James Austin and David M. Aaron, "The Impact of the War on Drugs," National Council on Crime and Deliquency, 1989; *Drug Abuse Warning Network*, National Institute for Drug Abuse, 1986; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Marital Status and Living Arrangements of Children Under 18 years, By Race and Hispanic Origin*, 1988.

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About the Author

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